

FAMILY CAMP PROJECT (FY05-5021)
Outcomes report and data analysis
Health Promotion and Prevention Initiatives (HPPI) Program

Abstract

The Family Camp was an opportunity for Soldiers and their families to spend a week away from their day-to-day responsibilities in an environment which encouraged mental, physical, and spiritual restoration. The camp included organized recreational activities and gave Soldiers and their families the opportunity to reconnect.

Participation in the Family Camp lowered stress levels and increased feelings of being close and connected within families. The camp enhanced Soldier and family readiness through family connection and reconnection, relationship-building opportunities, quality family time, and a stress-reducing atmosphere. The camp also taught resiliency skills, which further enhanced readiness for Soldiers and their families.

Project detail

Project overview: The project was designed as a proactive approach to preventing the numerous health and wellness issues that can precede or follow deployment, including unresolved anger, stress, diminished ability to cope with change, and relational conflict.

The Family Camp began in 2004 and is held yearly at a nearby family resort that is owned and operated by an internationally known non-profit organization. The weeklong camp for Active Duty and Army Reserve Soldiers and their families included a daily itinerary with a variety of recreational activities such as horseback riding, ropes course, swimming pool, trout pond, tennis courts, basketball, volleyball, Frisbee golf, and a playground. There were also group gatherings each evening. Although participation in camp activities was not mandatory, most attendees fully participated in the camp.

A total of 53 families (204 people) participated in three separate camp weeks in FY05. Participant feedback was obtained through an internet-based survey. Both Soldiers and their spouses stated that the memories and bonds formed during the Family Camp will be something that they will rely on to get them through future deployments.

Partnerships: The Installation Chaplain's Office, Medical Department Activity (MEDDAC), Wellness Center, Army Community Service Center (ACS), Installation Command, local businesses, and the resort staff and parent organization came together to form an effective partnership for this project. One benefit of this partnership was that Soldiers and their families were able to attend the camp at a discounted rate, based on rank.

Impact on force readiness: Force readiness is negatively impacted by stress, anger, unresolved relational conflict, risky behaviors, and feelings of having no control. These emotional issues can cause a Soldier or family member to be distractible, experience bursts of anger, engage in unhealthy behaviors, and/or sleep poorly. These issues often result in more frequent visits to healthcare providers.

The Family Camp provided a unique opportunity for Soldiers and their families to address these emotional issues which negatively impact force readiness. The camp enabled participants to improve physical, mental, and spiritual health and well-being and also to build family bonds. This improved well-being resulted in increased force readiness.

The Family Camp also positively affected readiness by teaching skills that build resiliency. Resiliency is the ability to cope well with challenges and to bounce back from adversity. Soldiers that are resilient are better able to focus on their mission. Families who are resilient are better able to cope with stress, manage relationships, and support each other. Soldiers and their families learned resiliency skills through the experiences and challenges they shared together during the camp.

Data collection: Soldiers and their spouses were asked to complete a brief Internet-based survey at three points in time:

- before attending the camp,
- at the end of the camp week, and
- several weeks after the conclusion of the camp.

The survey was conducted online to facilitate data collection. All surveys were anonymous.

The number of surveys completed at each point in time is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Count of Soldiers and spouses completing each survey

			Total
	Soldier	Spouse	
Before camp	24 (36.9%)	41 (63.1%)	65 (100.0%)
End of the camp week	18 (45.0%)	22 (55.0%)	40 (100.0%)
Several weeks after camp	6 (25.0%)	18 (75.0%)	24 (100.0%)
Totals	48 (37.2%)	81 (62.8%)	129 (100.0%)

The Family Camp survey contained the following questions:

1. Are you: (*select one*)

☐ Active Duty Soldier ☐ Army Reserve Soldier (mobilized) ☐ Spouse of a Soldier

2. When are you taking this survey? (*select one*)
- Before the Family Camp
 - At the end of the week of Family Camp
 - Several weeks after the end of Family Camp

Respondents were asked to respond to the following six questions using a scale of 1 (very low) to 10 (very high):

- 3. My stress level today is...
- 4. My average stress over the past month has been...
- 5. The feelings I have of being close and connected to my spouse are...
- 6. The feelings I have of being close and connected to my children are...
- 7. The feelings I have of being close and connected to my family are...
- 8. The feelings our children have of being close and connected to their Active Duty parent are...

Finally, survey respondents were asked to respond to two open-ended questions:

- 9. How do you think the Family Camp contributes to or improves Army force readiness?
- 10. Additional comments regarding the Family Camp

For purposes of data analysis, Active Duty and Army Reserve Soldiers were grouped together.

Data limitations: Since the surveys were completed anonymously, surveys could not be matched to compare the same individual's responses at different points in time. In addition, some response sets were small. Also, other unknown confounding variables (such as changes in health status or other external sources of stress) could have impacted survey responses.

Assumptions: Although the surveys were completed anonymously, two assumptions could be made about survey completion. First, it would be unlikely for a respondent to ignore the first two survey opportunities and complete only the final survey. Therefore, it may be assumed that individuals who completed the final survey probably completed at least one other survey. Secondly, it may also be probable that responses in each of the survey points in time are a subset of the previous time point (i.e., survey responders at the end of the camp week are a subset of survey responders before camp; and survey responders several weeks after camp are a subset of the survey responders at the end of the camp week). However, it is impossible to either prove or disprove either of these assumptions.

Data analysis: Survey responses were analyzed in two ways. First, all respondents were grouped together. The median responses for Questions 3 through 8 were compared for the surveys completed before camp and the surveys completed at the end of the camp week. The summary of this comparison is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Median responses, Questions 3 through 8

Survey question	(scale: 1 is very low; 10 is very high)	
	Before camp	End of camp week
3. Stress level today	5	1
4. Stress level past month	7	6
5. Feeling close/connected to spouse	8	9
6. Feeling close/connected to children	9	10
7. Feeling close/connected to family	8	9
8. Children feeling close/connected to Active Duty parent	6	9

As shown in Table 2, the median stress levels decreased for Questions 3 and 4, and the median feelings of being close and connected increased for Questions 5 through 8. These changes would be expected after a week spent at camp. Of particular note are the differences between before camp and the end of the camp week responses for stress level today (Question 3) and for children feeling close and connected to the Active Duty parent (Question 8).

For the second data analysis, Soldier and spouse responses for Questions 3 through 8 were examined as separate groups and statistically significant differences were noted. Three comparisons were made: before camp vs. the end of the camp week; the end of the camp week vs. several weeks after camp; and before camp vs. several weeks after camp. For purposes of data analysis, responses were grouped and defined as: low (scale responses 1 – 3); medium (scale responses 4 – 7); and high (scale responses 8 – 10).

Statistically significant differences were found for four questions in the before camp vs. the end of the camp week comparison. Those differences are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Statistically significant differences – before camp vs. the end of the camp week

Question	Group(s)	Direction of change
3. Stress today	Soldiers and spouses	Less stress
5. Close/connected to spouse	Soldiers	More connected
7. Close/connected to family	Soldiers	More connected
8. Children close/connected to Active Duty parent	Soldiers and spouses	More connected

The differences are not surprising, as less stress and closer family connections would be expected to result from a week spent at camp. This data indicates that the project goal of enabling Soldiers to reconnect with their families was achieved.

A comparison was also made between survey responses from the end of the camp week vs. several weeks after the camp. Statistically significant differences were found for three questions, as illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4: Statistically significant differences – end of camp week vs. several weeks after camp

Question	Group	Direction of change
3. Stress today	Spouses	More stress
5. Close/connected to spouse	Soldiers*	More connected
7. Close/connected to family	Soldiers*	Less connected

**Small data sets for Soldier responses limit meaningful analysis.*

The differences noted in Table 4 are also not surprising, as an expected impact of the return to everyday responsibilities would be increased stress and also a lessened feeling of being close and connected to family. Although small data sets limit meaningful interpretation of the data for Question 5, it is interesting to note that several weeks after the camp there was still a significant difference in a positive direction for feelings of being close and connected between Soldiers and their spouses. It was not surprising, either, that Soldiers felt less connected to the family after returning to a regular routine and responsibilities.

In addition to the data limitations mentioned previously, an additional challenge in the data analysis process was difficulty in determining direction of change for responses with statistically significant differences. For example, responses to Questions 3 through 8 involved three response groupings: low, medium, and high. Some shifts in responses between these three groups for different points in time were easily identified in terms of positive or negative change, as illustrated in Table 5.

Table 5: Stress today (Question 3) response comparison by percentage

Soldiers	Low	Medium	High
Before camp	45.8%	45.8%	8.3%
End of camp week	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Spouses			
Before camp	29.3%	46.3%	24.4%
End of camp week	90.9%	4.5%	4.5%

The differences between stress level percentages in Table 5 seem to indicate a general shift to lower stress levels, even though individual before- and after-camp surveys could not be matched. However, interpretation of survey results was not always this straightforward, as illustrated in Table 6.

Table 6: Stress past month (Question 4) response comparison by percentage

Spouses	Low	Medium	High
Before camp	4.9%	63.4%	31.7%
Several weeks after camp	27.8%	33.3%	38.9%

Analysis of the responses shown in Table 6 reveals a statistically significant difference in spouse responses. However, since percentages in all three categories changed, and since individual

survey responses could not be matched, a definitive direction of change (i.e., shift to a lower or higher stress level) cannot be clearly determined.

Qualitative outcomes: The two open-ended survey questions asked respondents how the Family Camp contributed to readiness (Question 9) and asked for additional comments (Question 10). The total number of responses received for these two questions was 113 and 92, respectively.

The following four comments are representative of participant responses to “How do you think the Family Camp contributes to or improves Army force readiness?” (Question 9)

- “When you improve the morale of the family, it will definitely improve the work environment. The Soldier’s mind is free from worrying regarding family issues.”
- “...[the Family Camp] contributes a great deal to morale and mental well-being, which are a cornerstone of readiness.”
- “Happy family equals happy Soldier.”
- “[Family Camp] gave us time to connect or reconnect after spending so much time apart. Even when our Soldiers are home from deployment, they spend so much time at work getting ready for the next deployment that it is hard to have a lot of quality family time.”

Additional comments (Question 10) about Family Camp included the following representative responses:

- “Family retreats or activities like this are invaluable for maintaining strong relationships between Soldiers and their family members.”
- “The experiences of [Family Camp] stay with you for a long time after the camp.”
- “One of the best things [was] what happened to our relationship. This camp strengthened our bond and the bond between my husband and son.”
- “The fact that everything is on the agenda [and] will have already been planned and that I can show up with my family to have a great time is a relief.”
- “This should become a regular event every year for even more families.”

Many participants commented specifically that the Family Camp experience enhanced family and Soldier readiness. In addition, many responses stated that the week spent at Family Camp was the best week of their lives. Improved morale was also frequently mentioned in the responses to Questions 9 and 10.

The only negative comment received was regarding the process used to award slots for attending the Family Camp. The survey responder felt that individuals in deployable units should be given preference over Service members from non-deployable units.

Additional anecdotal evidence of the effect of the Family Camp was reported by the project coordinator. For example, one spouse had struggled with severe lower back pain for a year prior to the Family Camp. This pain had negatively affected family, professional and social life. Upon arrival to camp, the spouse made camp leadership aware of her inability to participate in the physical activities.

However, by day three of the camp, the spouse was able to play sand volleyball, complete the ropes course, ride horses, and participate in other activities without pain. Ultimately, the spouse identified previously unrecognized internal stresses as the apparent cause of the physical problems. The Family Camp enabled her to realize the extent of the stress and also begin to manage that stress more effectively. Apart from one short (three-day) episode of low back pain since the Family Camp, the spouse has remained pain-free.

Translatability: There is no question that the unique Family Camp location, environment and activity agenda impacted Soldiers and their families in ways that are not easily replicated elsewhere. However, analysis of camp outcomes identified several themes frequently mentioned as playing a significant role in the Family Camp experience:

- Family connection and reconnection
- Relationship-building
- Quality family time
- Stress reduction
- Increased resiliency

These themes were used to develop the guidelines for enhancing family readiness that are listed below. These guidelines can be incorporated into different types of programs, activities, and interventions for Soldiers and their families at any Army installation in order to enhance Soldier and family readiness.

Family Readiness Enhancing Guideline #1

Providing a stress-free haven where families can strengthen and/or reestablish relationships (whether before or after deployment) is enormously valuable.

- The Family Camp was very effective at building family bonds, particularly between the Active Duty family members and their children.

Family Readiness Enhancing Guideline #2

Encouragement and challenges conducted in a safe, controlled environment help Soldiers and their families to tap into their strengths and improve resiliency.

- Individuals gained self-confidence by working through something they did not think they could do. These types of experiences can help Soldiers and their families work through new challenges in the future (like deployment).
- Whereas the impact of the Family Camp was influenced by being in a different environment away from everyday stresses, it should be noted that this impact was not wholly due to the camp itself being something new. Soldiers and their families frequently are exposed to new experiences. However, these new experiences are often void of positive outcomes. The Family Camp created an environment which did produce positive outcomes to new experiences, as Soldiers and their families were enabled to succeed at new challenges (like the ropes course or white water rafting).

Family Readiness Enhancing Guideline #3

Providing learning experiences and challenges to the entire family unit is very important.

- These experiences and challenges teach Soldiers and their spouses the importance of supporting each other. Involving children also helps the children learn respect for their parents, and vice versa, as families work through challenges together.

Family Readiness Enhancing Guideline #4

Soldiers and their families strengthen the bonds between them by building memories together.

- Memories are not built only through unique or “extreme” activities (like a ropes course); memories can be built from simple, shared activities (like taking time to talk or to fish). The important aspect is time spent together.

Family Readiness Enhancing Guideline #5

Inclusion of the spiritual component in a program or activity is a resource that is often left untapped.

- The spiritual component enhances resiliency and connects individuals to something larger than themselves. This aspect provides strength for challenging experiences that will be encountered in the future.

Lessons learned

The Family Camp also provided other valuable lessons learned:

- Partnerships are essential. Find out what the community has available and take advantage of those resources.
- Provide opportunities for programs that focus on the whole family.
- Include resources that will strengthen Soldier and family resiliency.
- Take advantage of opportunities to demonstrate good rapport with the community.
- Include non-mandated opportunities for growth, family bond building, and resiliency when planning and implementing programs for Soldiers and their families.

Questions for further study

1. What are the after-effects of Family Camp on deployment for both Soldiers and their families? How long do those effects last? Does leadership notice a difference in deployed Soldiers who attended the Family Camp?
2. What are the best methods for enhancing Soldier and family member resiliency? Should these resources be team-oriented, since the military is also very team-oriented? What individual resiliency-building resources would also be effective?
3. Could a Family Camp experience be created at any local installation (i.e., not at a family resort)? What would the model for this Family Camp look like?